Back when I was in high school, I read one day the results of a nationwide survey reporting that what American citizens most desired was world peace. In accordance with that desire, peace studies programs have been proliferating at many colleges and universities, along with an increasingly sophisticated terminology. In the very title of this column, the first word, “peacemaking,” has been in use in English since the sixteenth century, but the second noun, “peacebuilding,” is very recent, not to be found in either Webster’s Third New International Dictionary or in the compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, both of which were published in 1971. As used by theorists, peacemaking refers to the process of drafting a workable peace accord between warring parties, with at least the final negotiations being conducted by professional diplomats. A recent example would be the Good Friday Accord signed in Belfast in 1998. Even though that accord was a milestone in reducing the violence that had plagued Northern Ireland for many years, the lingering animosities and suspicions that occasionally erupt in further bombings and killings even today mean that “peacebuilders” are still very much needed—persons dedicated to normalizing relations and reconciling differences between all factions even after the signing of an accord. Here, even more than in the area of peacemaking strictly so-called, it is normal citizens who are often most prominently involved.

In the rest of this column, I want to do two things: First, in keeping with the name of this regular column, “Signs of the Times,” I will point to some signs that can encourage us to hope and work toward peace among peoples and nations. Second, I will to discuss the work of one very effective peacebuilder in the hope that her example will lead others to become involved in such activity, even those of us living in societies where the need for reconciliation may not be nearly as intense or as widespread as in Northern Ireland.

**Signs of Hope**

On March 20, 2010, the anthropologist Douglas P. Fry gave a presentation at the Washington Theological Union in which he developed themes he had discussed earlier in his important book *Beyond War: The Human Potential for Peace*. Among his major points were these: (1) war is relatively recent in human societies and is not intrinsic to human nature; (2) human aggression is not a rigid adaptation but rather “a facultative adaptation, somewhat like the capacity to learn language” (Fry, 173); (3) the fact that countries that were bitter enemies in the last

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world war are now friends and trading partners (France and Germany, the United States and Japan) demonstrates that peaceful relationships are certainly attainable if victors are not vindictive and are willing to build bridges; and (4) the very flexibility of our species opens the possibility for forming new kinds of global systems that might once have been unimaginable. As an example of this last point, Fry has pointed out that the overarching authority structures found in the European Union make the possibility of war within its boundaries “about as unlikely as war breaking out between Indiana and Illinois” (Fry, 225). Even in Israel, where violence has claimed the lives of so many people in recent decades, there are ongoing initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians that have promoted mutual understanding and led to warm friendships that the persons involved would once have thought impossible. Many of these inspiring stories can be found on the website http://traubman.igc.org/messages.htm, supervised by Dr. and Mrs. Len Traubman.

From Shy Homemaker to Effective Peacebuilder

Lest anyone conclude that the pathways to peace mentioned in the previous paragraph lie exclusively within the competence of government leaders and diplomats—the kinds of persons who devised the Marshall Plan after the Second World War or hammered out the organizational details of the European Union—the crucial role of other, quite ordinary people in peacemaking must also be recognized. Instead of speaking in generalities, I will give one specific example.

Among the many persons who contributed to the atmosphere that led to the signing of the Northern Ireland peace accord in 1998 was a woman named Mairead Corrigan Maguire. Born into a Catholic family in Belfast, she was in her mid-twenties when the worst of the Troubles began in 1969. Although grieving the many deaths, Mairead did not become involved in peacemaking activities until her two young nephews and a niece were killed when violence suddenly erupted while they were walking with their mother along a road in Belfast in August, 1976. Soon Mairead, together with another woman who had actually seen the children die, was organizing marches of Protestant and Catholic women that eventually led to peace rallies of more than 50,000 people, the largest such demonstrations ever held in that part of the world.

Although Mairead eventually received international recognition and some major awards for her work in peacebuilding, it is important (and encouraging) to note that she was a very ordinary person, no different from any of us, but she grew immensely by not backing away from the challenges facing her. For example, looking back on her early involvement, she once said:

I remember speaking at a Peace People assembly in the splendid surroundings of the Europa Hotel in Belfast and my legs going to jelly as I watched the colored lights going on and off in front of me. I was so frightened that I asked [an associate, Ciaran McKeown,] to give the talk instead, but he promptly told me that I must get up and speak. Hard as those days were for all of us, I believe it was a time of growth for us all. (Corrigan Maguire, 7)

She was also quite open about the religious grounding of her work, found primarily in the Gospel but also in the words and example of Mahatma Gandhi. In an open letter to friends and grassroots leaders in India marking the fiftieth anniversary of Gandhi’s assassination, she wrote: “I believe that Gandhi’s greatest legacy to both India and humanity was the example of a life
filled with the Spirit of God, a life lived in the spirit of nonviolence, a life lived every minute fully alive, in deep awareness of the presence of God in, about, and all around us. It was this loving Spirit which enabled Gandhi to become one of history's greatest prophets and practitioners of nonviolence” (Corrigan Maguire, 58–59).

Just as Gandhi did not shrink from speaking frankly to those who opposed his way of nonviolence, Mairead directly challenged the members of the Irish Republican Army to be true to their Christian heritage. In an open letter to them, published in 1993, she said:

In the republican movement, you are now faced with the need to change radically, to move away from the “armed struggle” and into a nonviolent alternative. Your right to your political aspiration and national identity has been acknowledged. The way of active nonviolence is in tune with your Christian roots and heritage. You know that in your heart. As a child, you learned to pray, “Help me to live like Jesus.” Jesus with a machine gun does not come off as [a credible] figure! It is time now for a new vision and a fresh wisdom. (Corrigan Maguire, 26)

Mairead also took on Gerry Adams, the head of the Sinn Fein (generally recognized as the political arm of the IRA), after Adams had published a letter in an Irish newspaper defending the use of violence. Her published response, appearing in the same paper a week later, was unfinching in its criticism of Adams's stance. She wrote:

You ask for suggested strategies. If we choose to be Christian before being nationalistic or materialistic, then the question before us is: “What strategy would Christ use?” . . . Jesus’ strategy is “love your neighbor as yourself” and “love your enemies.” This means we overcome evil through active nonviolence. We respect the humanity of each person, even if we cannot agree with that person’s actions. Our strategy is dialogue. It is a necessary first step. It is up to everyone to make dialogue possible. We all need to recognize the possibility that we ourselves can change, and our neighbor can change also. . . . I can only ask you not to get discouraged in your quest for dialogue with others. (Corrigan Maguire, 30)

That last sentence may be the most important advice of all, given our propensity for wanting quick results from whatever we undertake. Persons who have been active in peacemaking and peacebuilding much of their adult lives, such as former Senator George Mitchell or Professor Marc Gopin, regularly note that patience and perseverance are absolutely essential. Without these qualities, little of lasting significance will be achieved, but with them, the inevitable conflicts that arise between nations or groups within a nation can be resolved in nonviolent ways.

References
